THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Silences of God

June 28, 1998
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In the beginning it may be an inner exploration of fifteen or twenty minutes every once in a while until, gradually, a daily meditation practice develops. Sitting down quietly once or twice a day ... the healing extends from those quiet moments to permeate the whole day. A healing moment is one in which the mind is not clinging to its passing show, not lost in the personal melodrama of its content, but tuned to the constant unfolding of the process in a moment of being fully alive. Insights accrue as wisdom. Mercy accrues as compassion. Healing accumulates from moment to moment when discomfort is not mindfully, open-heartedly, in the present, where all that we seek is to be found.

Stephen Levine
Healing Into Life and Death

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THE SILENCES OF GOD

Galatians 8:1, 13-15
1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a

"The Lord was not in the wind...the earthquake...the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." 1 Kings 19:11-12

Dear God, we live in the midst of much noise. So accustomed are we to all of it, that sometimes silence is disturbing, uncomfortable, awkward – so we fill it up with whatever is at hand: television, radio, any voice will do. Here we are, doing it again – filling the silence with our words and we ask you to use our words to speak your word to us. Silence any voice in us but your own and after this time together, give us quiet moments in the middle of our hurried, busy lives to hear your voice, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

* * *

This is a sermon about silence.

Silence is a good thing, a healthy thing, a creative thing, and a necessary thing. There simply isn't very much of it. When our children were little and full of energy and unlimited noise-making capability and still willing to cooperate with whatever their parents suggested, we used to ask them to play a game our parents taught us – under similar circumstances, I am sure. The name of the game is "Quaker Meeting." "Quaker Meeting has begun: no laughing, no talking, no chewing gum." It actually worked – briefly, on occasion. Some took it very seriously and rose to the challenge, sitting very still, not making a sound. Others saw the challenge differently and did everything they could think of to make a brother or sister break the silence by laughing. But the result was a few brief moments of blessed silence.

There is not much of it in our lives. Physicians are tracking the long-term effects of the noise that is part of urban life and they're worried about us. The *New York Times* reported last week that a woman is suing the state of Massachusetts to regulate the noise level of music for aerobics classes in health clubs. After her workout she noticed she couldn't hear for awhile, and upon investigation, it was discovered that in 60% of health clubs, aerobic music was played at a decibel level equivalent to a chainsaw. There seems to be significant hearing loss for people who are subjected to airplane noise, industrial noise, and of course, the incredible volume of the music at rock concerts and bars. A funny thing happens to people over fifty or so who have occasion to be in one of those places, as happened to me recently, on ministerial business, let me hasten to add.

The noise level at a popular Chicago singles bar on a Saturday night is about the same as standing behind a 747 at takeoff. Music is loud, voices are loud...in fact, people are screaming into one another's ears. I didn't hear a thing all evening. I nodded my head a lot – smiled – said, or shouted, "That's great" but have no idea what my young conversation partners were saying or what I just agreed to.

It is difficult to get away from noise. We live in the midst of the blare of car horns, diesel buses, unmuffled motorcycles, jack hammers and construction drills, cigarette boats. On a recent early morning walk on the lakefront, an intentional silent time when I do a lot of thinking, I was startled to hear a telephone ring. Around me whipped a young man on roller blades, talking full voice into his cellular phone.

This is a sermon about silence. And it is a sermon based on one of the best stories in the Bible – the story of Elijah, Ahab the King and his fascinating wife, Jezebel, the cave, the wind, earthquake and fire, and the still small voice. The trouble with this story, of course, is its length and complexity. It just won't fit into the prescribed slot for a scripture lesson during worship, so we usually truncate it and hope that the congregation remembers enough of the original to fill in the gaps. This morning, I'd like you to hear it in its entirety.

The time is the ninth century BC. Ahab is the King of Israel who had married a foreigner, a Phoenician, whose name was Jezebel.

What a fascinating character Jezebel was. She was the daughter of a Phoenician priest and a very devout woman. Her religion was called "Baalism," the religion of the land of Canaan before the Israelites invaded and occupied it. Baalism is what is called a nature religion. It focused on the mysterious and awesome forces of the natural world. Baalism was particularly concerned with the mysterious life force contained in sexuality and reproduction. Fertility was the focus of Baal theology and ritual.

Queen Jezebel was such an enthusiastic adherent of Baalism that when Ahab brought her home to his royal palace in Israel, she insisted on bringing with her an eye-popping retinue of 400 Baal priests and 400 Baal prophets.

Now Ahab has a problem. Israel worships Yahweh, the one God. There is no room in the life of Israel for other gods. Ahab has a mixed marriage to a very strong woman who brought her religion with her right into the royal palace. Not only that, but Ahab has to house and feed those 800 priests and prophets who move right in and start practicing their religion in the palace. Not surprisingly, their religion begins to look pretty interesting to the people with its focus on fertility and its celebration of sexuality. Not surprisingly the older Mosaic religion, with its law, looks confining and negative and before you know it, the prophets of Yahweh are on the outside looking in, chased out of town, persecuted, some even executed.

Enter Elijah, God's man, who travels a long way, makes an appointment to see the King and tells him bluntly that because of his unfaithfulness there will be a drought. For two years there is a drought. Ahab gets the point and summons Elijah back to the palace for further conversation. Elijah repeats the indictment and now things get really interesting.

Elijah challenges Jezebel's priests and prophets, all of them, to a test of strength on Mt. Carmel. We visited the spot a few years ago where whatever happened, happened.

The wonderful thing about the Bible, by the way, is that it tells these ancient, primitive stories without apology or explanation; it is not a neatly sanitary, always reasonable book.

This story certainly isn't.

Two bulls are slaughtered. Elijah challenges the priests and prophets to call on Baal to send down fire. Elijah will call on Yahweh, God of Israel. The contest begins. The Baal priests try and try, becoming more frenzied: they sing, dance, shout, chant; nothing happens. In a wonderful detail, when you think that this story is almost 2,800 years old, Elijah can't resist making a little joke, "Perhaps your god is taking a nap" it is translated. Actually, the Hebrew is very earthy, although no one has yet been brave enough to translate it accurately. What Elijah says is, "Maybe your god is taking a comfort break," which is, of course, yet another euphemism for what the Hebrew says, but I assume you get the point.

Elijah prevails. Yahweh sends fire. The people shout "Yahweh is God" and then, even though we wish they hadn't done it, they seize all the Baal priests and prophets and Elijah slaughters them all on the spot, as the rain begins to fall, ending the drought. Ahab is happy, although chastened, as he drives his chariot home through the rain. Elijah is ecstatic – he's running through the rain, ahead of the chariot, a kind of ancient victory lap.

When Ahab arrives at the palace he delivers some good news and bad news to the Queen. Good news is that the drought is over. Bad news is all your priests and prophets are dead.

Jezebel is furious. In her fury she dictates a letter to Elijah – "In 24 hours you'll be as dead as my priests and prophets."

Elijah runs for his life, travels a day's journey into the wilderness, and considers giving up. "What's the use, after all? Even my victories feel like defeats." "It is enough. Now, O Lord, take away my life." After forty days he ends up in a secret cave on Mt. Horeb and then strange things happen, nature phenomena: a windstorm so violent the mountain seems to be splitting, an earthquake, fire, lightning, none of which do for Elijah what they are supposed to do, namely, put him in touch with the reality of God, assure him of God's power and presence. And then, after all the wind and power and noise ... the Hebrew is very difficult ... "a still small voice of calm." Other possibilities are: "a thin whisper," "a faint murmuring sound," "the sound of a gentle silence." The most recent translation is "a sound of sheer silence."

Think about that for a moment, "a sound of sheer silence." What does that sound like? What does that mean? What Elijah heard was the voice of God. God in the silence.

So perhaps it is important, maybe even essential, to create silence, to make time and space in life for silence before God.

In her new book, *Amazing Grace, a Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris explores the meaning of many of the familiar words of faith with sensitivity and insight. In a chapter on silence she tells about teaching poetry to elementary school children and her exercise in noise and silence. First she tells the children to make as much noise as they want while sitting at their desks. The students shout, stomp, pound desks, whistle. And then she asks them to make silence – no noises – no funny faces. And then she has them describe the two experiences and write about each.

Some youngsters love the silence – others are uncomfortable almost to the point of fear. "It's like we're waiting for something," one said. "It's scary." When they described the noise, the students turned to easy euphemisms. "We sound like a herd of elephants." But making silence, Norris observes, liberates their imaginations. When they wrote about silence, their images had a depth and maturity unlike anything else they wrote. One boy came up with an image ... "as slow and silent as a tree." A third grade girl wrote, "silence is spiders spinning their webs, a silkworm making its silk. Lord help me to know when to be silent." One little girl in North Dakota wrote what Norris calls a gem of spiritual wisdom which she returns to when her life becomes too noisy and hectic, "Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go." [p. 16]

The great philosopher Alfred North Whitehead defined religion as whatever you do with your solitude. But even our religion – even our worship can be noisy and busy.

In a wonderful essay on worship, Richard Avery, of the Avery and Marsh team which has done so much good work in liturgical renewal, laments the absence of silence in most Protestant worship and our reliance on busyness and activity and the printed word. Avery observes that when the risen Christ was present to the two disciples at Emmaus it was in the breaking of bread – not handing out paper. Yet, he observes, the one indispensable element of Protestant worship is the bulletin.

"Our fear of silence," he writes, "leads us to fill up every nook and cranny of our time together and leaves no room for silence before God." When they happen at all, periods of silence in worship are almost so brief as to be funny. "Worship as agenda" Avery calls it – which presents a service as something to "get through." [*The Register of the Company of Pastors*, Summer 1998, p. 9]

So yes, at the end of this sermon we will experience silence in worship. If you're listening to this on tape, stay with us, your tape isn't broken; experience some silence wherever you are. And if you're reading this, stop at the end and sit and listen to the sound of sheer silence.

Sometimes silence is eloquent. Jesus was silent one time, magnificently, eloquently, courageously silent, standing in front of Pontius Pilate, his back bloody, a crown of thorns pressed into his forehead. "Speak," Pilate commanded. "For God's sake just don't stand there: say something." And Jesus remained silent, "didn't say a mumblin' word" the spiritual puts it: stood silently before all the power of Rome and the hatred of his own people and the conspiracy which now held him and was about to crucify him and that silence is thunderous because it said more clearly than any voice that God loves this world so much as to send an only son to die for its salvation, and that the power of love need never argue, or justify itself, because it is the power of God.

Sometimes silence is all we have to offer one another. A young woman, 30, battling for her life, lost the battle last week and there are no words to speak to her heartbroken husband; in fact words will not bear the weight of this and those who love him will go to him and stand with him and wrap strong arms of love around him – in silence.

And sometimes God is silent. "Why, God?" we ask when tragedy strikes. "Give me an

answer...give me a word." Few of us have heard the voice of God in the middle of the night or day. Like Elijah, we listen for God in the dramatic; the wind, earthquake and fire, but God is not often there.

In fact, few of us have ever heard God speak and it may be that we are listening to the wrong voices and noise. It may be that the story is right: that after the wind, earthquake and fire, after all the places and ways and experiences where we expect to encounter God, afterward, in the sound of sheer silence, God comes to us.

In that silence after the noise, standing at the mouth of the cave, Elijah heard two words. He needed both of them and so do we. The first is, "I am here. I am here in the silence. There is nowhere you can go that I am not with you. There is no silence so deep that I do not speak through it.... There is no tragedy – no suffering so deep that I am not in it with you."

And the second word Elijah heard is, "Go back – Return."

I will be here for you in the silence. But you cannot stay here. You must to back to the world, to all the noise, the conflicts, the loud arguments, the busyness, the sometimes frenzied noisy hurried existence you lead which does, at times, feel like running for your life.

Two words, "I am here" and "Go back to the world" spoken not in the wind, earthquake and fire, but afterward, in the sound of sheer silence.

Now let us be silent before God.

We will break the silence by singing *"Kum ba Yah, My Lord."*

You won't need the Hymnal. It's a simple song.

> Kum ba Yah, My Lord, Kum ba Yah
> Someone's crying, Lord, Kum ba Yah
> Someone's singing, Lord, Kum ba Yah
> Someone's praying, Lord, Kum by Yah
>
> Come by Here, my Lord, in this silence
> Come by Here.